

Pentecost 3 (Proper 5) Series C

Proper 5/Third Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

“When in the Hour of Deepest Need” (*Lutheran Service Book*, # 615)

“When in the hour of deepest need we know not where to look for aid ...”

It is one of the choral director’s prime frustrations—when the going gets toughest for the amateur choir, when the notes are difficult to remember and the rhythms getting more and more sophisticated, when tricky entrances depend upon close attention to the director, when you have personally practiced giving precise cues so that you could be most beneficial to the choir—it is then that you find that the singers have their heads buried in the score. You long to engage the singers’ eyes, to model the shape of the mouth for good vowel placement, to see some teeth and tongue as consonants are being articulated, but all you see is the tops of their heads. They are in trouble, and you want to help, but no one is looking to you for guidance. “Help is not to be found by looking down,” you say, “but by looking up.”

None of us is much different in the hours of our deepest need. When we are worried or distressed, at our wit’s end to solve a problem or convinced that any solution is beyond our capabilities, our heads automatically go down. We know not where to look for aid, for our eyes are on our feet, and we see nothing but our own purposeless and errant pathways—trails to nowhere that give no comfort, no solace, and no direction.

But God, who cries “Call upon ME in the day of trouble,” (Psalm 50:15) would have us look upward. Indeed, in Jesus, the One who was “raised up” (John 12:20) on the cross, who “was taken up” (Acts 1:9), would always draw our eyes upward, so that we see HIM. In Christ, God compels us to look upward, away from our own sad and ineffectual devices, to see and to hear the promise of rescue that is sounded throughout the scriptural story of salvation. And when we look up, we see Jesus, waiting to meet us at the throne of God, his face aglow with forgiveness and promise. As one old anonymous choral anthem (“Despair Not, My Soul”) concludes: “Look upward to heaven and you’ll soon be glad!”

The hymn writer seems to know that our troubles are rooted in our sins, and he puts on our lips the confession of those sins, along with the fear and frustration and confusion that those sins bring into our lives. And in the next breath, he has us articulate our own thanksgiving, our desire to change, and our praise to our living, gracious, saving God.

People with their eyes on their feet tend to stumble; people focused on the loving face of their partner are freed to dance. In *Lutheran Service Book* this text is set to a tune that, when played with precision, actually dances. You can find a less rhythmically complex long-meter tune, but try to shun that enticement. Confession and absolution, reliance on the grace and guidance of

God, loosen our steps and set us at liberty for the often complex tasks of honoring God and serving our neighbors, even in the midst of our own difficulties.

Let's keep our eyes on Jesus. "Then you will look [upward?] and be radiant; your heart will throb and swell with joy." (Isaiah 60:5)

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When in the hour of deepest need
we know not where to look for aid;
when days and nights of anxious thought
no help or counsel yet have brought,

then is our comfort this alone
that we may meet before your throne;
to you, O faithful God, we cry
for rescue in our misery.

For you have promised, Lord, to heed
your children's cries in time of need
through him whose name alone is great,
our Savior and our advocate.

And so we come, O God, today
and all our woes before you lay;
for sorely tried, cast down, we stand,
perplexed by fears on ev'ry hand.

O from our sins, Lord, turn your face;
absolve us through your boundless grace.
Be with us in our anguish still;
free us at last from ev'ry ill.

So we with all our hearts each day
to you our glad thanksgiving pay,
then walk obedient to your Word,
and now and ever praise you, Lord.

Text: Paul Eber (1511-69); English translation by Catherine Winkworth 1827-78, alt.
Tune: WENN WIR IN HÖCHSTEN NÖTEN SEIN. Louis Bourgeois, c. 1510-61.

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Both the original German text and the tune are from the 16th century and are in the public domain. Celebrate the Reformation heritage!

[This devotion was prepared for the website of the Center for Church Music. It may be downloaded and duplicated for local use.]